Top of Form

15 June 2008

**Growing up Asian in Australia**

When she was growing up, Alice Pung says she was called a 'powerpoint', a derogatory term for Asian people in Australia. Alice Pung and Shalini Akhil break through the stereotypes in this discussion of *Growing up Asian in Australia*, a collection of accounts about mateship, battlers, leaving home and being 'unAustralian'.

**Transcript**

This transcript was typed from a recording of the program. The ABC cannot guarantee its complete accuracy because of the possibility of mishearing and occasional difficulty in identifying speakers.

**Peter Mares**: If you picked up a book with chapter titles like 'Mateship', 'Battlers' and 'Pioneers', you'd be forgiven for assuming that it was about the early settlers of white Australia. But these are the categories writer Alice Pung has chosen to organise a collection of stories about growing up Asian in Australia. Included in the anthology are peculiarly Asian Australian experiences about feeling different and out of place and struggling with identity. But many of the stories also deal with the universal themes of youth; leaving home, falling in love, having the hots for someone and dealing with the parents.

Alice Pung joins me in the studio to talk about this anthology. Alice Pung, welcome to *The Book Show*.

**Alice Pung**: Thank you Peter.

**Peter Mares**: Alice is a lawyer and the author of *Unpolished Gem*, the story of growing up as a Chinese Cambodian Australian in the western suburbs of Melbourne. And also with us is one of the many contributors to the anthology, Shalini Akhil. Shalini, welcome to you.

**Shalini Akhil**: Thank you.

**Peter Mares**: Shalini is a writer who has been published in *Meanjin*, the *Sleepers Almanac* and *The Age*, and her first novel *The Bollywood Beauty* reveals elements of her Indo-Fijian background.

Alice, you've said that you wished you'd had a book like this collection, *Growing Up Asian in Australia*, when you were young. Why did you want a book like this? Why would you have wanted to have a book like this?

**Alice Pung**: That's a good question, Peter. When I was growing up, the young Australian literature we read were stories about mainly Americans. You had the teen fiction based on white, middle class Americans, usually with blue eyes, brown hair and slight variations of those. Growing up, I never read anything that I could identify with. And then you'd have the other stream of migrant literature. You know, the narrative of success stories about the young boy who comes here with nothing and his family works very hard and then the last few chapters is they make it, they buy a big house or he becomes a doctor or something like that. Those weren't the stories that I thought were unique to Australian experience.

**Peter Mares**: And Shalini, would you have liked a book like this when you were growing up?

**Shalini Akhil**: Absolutely. Similar to Alice's experience I grew up reading things like *Trixie Belden* and all those kind of mystery novels where none of the characters were brown, and the other part of it was Bollywood for me. So, obviously two separate extremes but nothing that I could really identify with.

**Peter Mares**: Alice, the stories in the collection range very widely. We've got filmmaker Tony Ayres retelling a confrontation he had with skinheads, Diana Nguyen, an actor, talking about five ways to disappoint your Vietnamese mother (a very wrenching story, I found, that one), Benjamin Law's account of coming out as gay, and the youngest writer is 16 years old. How did you choose the stories? Was there a guiding principle? Did you put it out to tender or did you contact people you know?

**Alice Pung**: How we did it was we put advertisements in all the major newspapers. We had a call for submissions and we received from about 170 to 185 submissions. For some of the chapters...for example, the chapter called 'Tall Poppies: Inspirational Asian Australians' I interviewed a lot of the people.

**Peter Mares**: That had people like the Lord Mayor of Melbourne, John So.

**Alice Pung**: Yes. But for the other chapters we put out a call for submissions. I didn't have many criteria for Black Inc, but the most important one was I said to my publishers, can you please send me the pieces with the names blacked out because I wanted to judge the pieces on the story and not on the person who is recognisable or a name I could identify with.

**Peter Mares**: So there are some prominent Asian Australians that have missed out, are there, because..?

**Alice Pung**: I'm sure there weren't any that missed out because some of them...for example, Dr Cindy Pan came through her agent, so you would know...and some stories they mentioned their names, their father calls them by name...

**Peter Mares**: The chapter headings I mentioned in my introduction, you're quite ironic in your choice of chapter headings like 'Battler' and 'Pioneers' and 'Legends'. Why did you choose those terms?

**Alice Pung**: Peter, historically in 1901 Australia became a federation, and that was a cause of major celebration, it was when we became a country. 1901 was also the time when the White Australia Policy, enacted by the Immigration Restriction Act, came into force. Asian Australians have been in Australia since 1810. We are a significant part of Australian identity but we've always been written about as the 'other'. Think about one of our national publications, *The Bulletin* magazine, that had been around over a century. Its masthead was 'Australia for the white man' and this is one of our greatest literary journals of Henry Lawson and very eminent writers. So I wanted these titles, 'Legends', 'Battlers', 'Mates', because Asian Australians have a very similar experience. And I've had Caucasian Australians read this book and say, 'I can't believe there are so many stories I can identify with.' Of course they could, these are Australian stories.

**Peter Mares**: That's what struck me about it actually in reading it, I was thinking about it this morning because I was reading quite a lot of the stories last night, was how Australian the voices are. It's a very Australian tone in there. Shalini Akhil, do you feel that?

**Shalini Akhil**: I do, but as Alice says, they are Australian stories, and there are other experiences intermingled with that, but I think that's the essence of all of these stories, they're coming from a very similar place and you don't need to be Asian Australian to be able to identify.

**Peter Mares**: And there's a lot of humour which is a very Australian kind of humour in there.

**Shalini Akhil**: Absolutely, yes.

**Peter Mares**: Shalini, I'm going to ask you to read a little bit from your story. We've edited slightly for time, but if I can get you to read from your story which is called *Destiny*, included in the volume. It's about you as a kid wishing or hoping that you could become Wonder Woman.

**Shalini Akhil**: I still have hope. You never know! So this is my story *Destiny*.

[reading from *I was very young when my obsession started...* to *...I was going to be Indian Wonder Woman.*]

**Peter Mares**: Shalini, one of the themes that comes through in a number of the stories is children rejecting their parentage, their heritage, being, for example, annoyed and frustrated with the grandfather who can't speak any English, that sort of thing, but then coming later to actually value it much more. Is that an experience for you? We see the grandmother there obviously convincing the young girl to take the Indian side of her heritage seriously.

**Shalini Akhil**: Yes, when I was younger, I was brought up between Sydney and Fiji, so I had a bit of a different experience or two polar opposite experiences growing up. I know that when I was younger all I wanted to do was to fit in, especially when I was in Sydney, I just wanted to be one of the crowd. I actually didn't know how to speak Hindi when I was a kid, and learnt under pressure. My grandfather came to visit once (it's always about my grandparents!) and said he refused to talk to me unless I could speak to him in Hindi, so I learnt very quickly at a very young age. But then we moved back to Fiji and I finally got my wish for fitting in in a physical sense but I sounded very Australian, so I never really fit in anywhere. But I did reject the idea of belonging to my cultural heritage as a kid, but as I got older I wanted to find out more about it.

**Peter Mares**: And is the term 'Asian Australian' problematic for you? Because in fact you're a Pacific Australian as well. If you said 'Asians in Britain' you're referring to people from the subcontinent, here in Australia you say 'Asian' and you tend to think Chinese and Vietnamese. It's a problematic term, isn't it?

**Shalini Akhil**: It is a problematic term. Like you say, in the UK or the US 'South Asian' is the general term, but I'm just happy to be invited along really. As you were saying earlier, it is about shared experience, and I guess in a roundabout way I could put my hand up and claim the title.

**Peter Mares**: Alice Pung, do you have views on that term? I guess we've got to call people something, but does it actually enforce stereotypes?

**Alice Pung**: Look, I called the book *Growing up Asian in Australia* and I wanted the broadest possible spectrum of Asians, that's why we have people like Shalini, her wonderful story, which is quite affectionate. It crosses between two cultures. We did get quite a few stories that were rejecting the culture, and Shalini's is beautiful, it's intergenerational and it's intercultural. I thought that...*Growing up Asian in Australia*, most people do think of Orientals and most people think of Orientals as the 'other', the occident, you know? Very, very cloistered families, windows you can't see through, and I wanted this book to be a window in which you could see worlds like Shalini's, you could see the affection the grandmother has for the younger child, you could see some of the struggles that one of our authors, who is a very famous chef now, has with quite a bit of violence in the family.

**Peter Mares**: And however much you might have wanted to fit in as a kid, other kids would remind you that you were Asian. Tell us about being called a 'power point'.

**Alice Pung**: Yes, that wasn't that big a deal but I thought it was an interesting story. We were called 'power points'. This is back in the early, early 90s, when Bill Gates was beginning to make his fortunes, so I thought, 'That's awesome, we're probably just slightly more dweeby than most people and all these kids probably think we're going to end up doing PowerPoint presentations or being Microsoft magnates...'

**Peter Mares**: Or being software engineers, because you did so well at school and that kind of stereotype there.

**Alice Pung**: Yes, and then one of my friends said, 'You know, Alice, they're not complimenting you, that's an insult. Have you looked at an Australian power point socket?' And I said, 'Yeah,' and they said, 'Well, doesn't it look like a sort of face?' And I had a look at it and I couldn't understand. They saw two sloping lines down and one in the middle, they saw a face, but the power point socket was white and that's...

**Peter Mares**: It's a very funny story that one, in the introduction to the book. The other theme that Shalini raised and which is in many of the stories is the one about the relationship with grandparents who want to maintain their culture and keep it going. I think it's Amy Choi's story in the opening about her grandfather who she can't talk to very well. Tell us a bit about that story.

**Alice Pung**: That's a very beautiful story about Amy Choi when she was 16, and one of the most memorable scenes is...she spoke English to her little brother and her grandfather couldn't understand English, they were watching television and her grandfather was about to sit down, and she said to her brother in English, 'Oh geez, I hope he doesn't sit down with us,' and he just got up and he walked away.

**Peter Mares**: He obviously did understand.

**Alice Pung**: He just understood. And after a while Amy Choi's piece goes on about her grandfather, I think he gets Alzheimer's, so he keeps leaving the house and they find him very far away, sometimes he's cut and bruised because he's fallen down. She has the responsibility of always bringing him back home.

**Peter Mares**: She sort of shadows him on his trips to town, doesn't she, to make sure he gets on the right train and leads him by the arm when he goes in the wrong direction, and then he forgets she's there again.

**Alice Pung**: Yes, it's a lovely piece. When she had a chance to speak to him she didn't want to, and after a while it was too late.

**Peter Mares**: That is, again...there are the specifics here of the language barrier and her not learning Chinese or rejecting her Chinese heritage as a kid and reclaiming it later, but there are many universals here, aren't there, Shalini Akhil, about missed opportunities, about the tensions we have with our parents, the wanting to be different to our parents, for them to leave us alone, being embarrassed by them, all that sort of stuff.

**Shalini Akhil**: Yes, I dealt with a lot of similar themes in my fiction novel called *The Bollywood Beauty* which was based a lot on my own experiences, and it was about that struggle between wanting to be the perfect daughter, wanting to fulfil their fantasies for your future, but also at the same time wanting to break away from that and define yourself. I think it's a constant struggle that people like me or people who come from that kind of background where your parents have massively high hopes for you and you're programmed to try and win that affection and win that approval. It takes a long time to deprogram, if ever. So you're always caught between this 'Oh, but I should have done law' thing, you know? It doesn't matter how successful you are in any other field.

**Alice Pung**: Well, Alice Pung, you've managed to do both; keep the parents happy and be a writer. But there are stories...Diana Nguyen's story about five ways to disappoint your Vietnamese mother is about her decision...her mother buys her a piano and gives her piano lessons as a child to encourage her, but then when she wants to do dramatic arts in high school and not maths and not science and not go on to study law, the mother is distressed, and in fact it leads to a break with the mother.

**Alice Pung**: Oh yes, extremely infuriated, and Diana Nguyen eventually becomes an actress, very brave girl, but she also gets a boyfriend later in her life, in her late teens and early 20s, and that's breaking point, that's when the mother says, 'Out you go.' All her bags are packed out the front, she comes back home one day and finds that she's been kicked out of home. These aren't the experiences that are told in the migrant narrative of success. These aren't the experiences that you would see on television, but these are very real experiences that I wanted to capture.

**Peter Mares**: You also say in your introduction that it's generally second generation immigrants like yourself who have the cultural capital to write their stories and to tell their stories and to tell the stories of their parents. The parents themselves don't speak. Is that a problem, that we don't hear, for example, from your mother who doesn't speak a great deal of English, we don't hear her voice directly?

**Alice Pung**: I think that's a big problem. If my mother could speak then I hope she'd write a book of her own, but she just can't, so we're lucky that we're able to tell our parents' stories. And I was very honoured that I did get quite a few stories in this anthology from an older generation.

**Peter Mares**: These are the ones you refer to as the 'pioneers' I think.

**Alice Pung**: The pioneers, yes...

**Peter Mares**: Because they came earlier than...

**Alice Pung**: They came early, and some of them have had ancestry since the Gold Rush days, they've been here for many years. The main difference I found (this is extraordinary) between our younger authors and our older ones is that the older ones have a wisdom of experience, so they're less angsty. Even though they lived through the White Australian Policy (most of our younger writers haven't), they have more of an acceptance of things that happened.

**Peter Mares**: And so there's some lessons in there as well, I guess, saying this is the book you wished you'd had as a child. Then there's something in there as well.

**Alice Pung**: Yes, to have older mentors like this.

**Peter Mares**: Alice Pung and Shalini Akhil, thank you both very much for joining me on *The Book Show*.

**Alice Pung**: Thank you.

**Shalini Akhil**: Thank you.

**Peter Mares**: Alice Pung is the editor of the anthology *Growing up Asian in Australia*, which is published by Black Inc, and Shalini Akhil is one of the contributors to the volume, and her first novel *The Bollywood Beauty* was also published a year or two ago, and I think there's a new novel underway, is there?

**Shalini Akhil**: Yes, there is.

**Peter Mares**: Okay, we look forward to that.

**Publications**

Title: *Growing up Asian in Australia*  
Author: Alice Pung  
Publisher: Black Inc  
ISBN: 978 186 395 1913